

On Efforts to Collegially Develop Teacher Professionalism

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ABSTRACT

The paper describes efforts to support the development of reflective practice at an basic school in Brno, the Czech Republic. The aims, structure, content and methods are mentioned, as well as some preliminary results. Also, the authors suggest a few preconditions of the success of possible future actions. The specific case is seen from the viewpoint of the situation of in-service teacher training in the Czech Republic.

The profession of a teacher is usually considered as physically and mentally exhausting. Recent surveys in basic schools have shown that the permanent task of a teacher to succeed in keeping up discipline in the classroom or the school is getting more and more difficult (e.g., Bendl, 1997). The everyday oscillation between the struggle to help the pupils and the necessity to control and have charge of their behaviour provokes doubts and conflicts in the perception of their professional role (e.g., Vašina, 1999:76). It seems that to manage new strains of this difficult job requires some regular and professional support, which is, however, hardly obtainable through traditional structures of in-service teacher training.

Czech teachers can nowadays choose from a varied offer of training events. Nevertheless, these are very often one-off courses, not being part of any sophisticated concept nor directly related to the development of their careers. Those who have passed the in-service courses then painfully try to get some recognition for their new knowledge and skills in their schools. Usually, the school does not even give them the opportunity to discuss the new experience. It is therefore not rare for the diligently gained skills to remain undeveloped in practice or even disappear.

The results of some surveys prove that the methods of group reflection and collegial intervision and supervision, which would support the professional growth of teachers, can but seldom be found in our schools (Pol and Lazarová, 1999:52). This practice is being intuitively substituted by informal discussions of teachers in their office rooms, which is equally good for their mental well-being but less so for their professional development. Uncontrolled discussions often lead to monotonous interpretations, supported by strong prejudices and inadequate constructions of reasons for seemingly similar cases. As a usual consequence thereof, eternally repeated — and always unproductive — teacher's interventions occur.

Many people who are responsible for the performance of schools know about this situation. Headteachers show a growing demand for educational activities (especially trainings) to be carried out in schools. These programmes, however, run into difficulties, as there is a lack of tradition and formal background, as well as, in more general terms, of finance, time, and so on. Nevertheless, evident benefits of teachers' school-based professional development, carried out with the help from their colleagues, can be pointed out:

- time saving (no travelling)
- lower costs for the school

- hot issues of common nature on the agenda
- members of staff able to get to know each other better and influence the school's climate
- opportunity to resolve rigid conflicts in the school
- starting up some long-term cooperation among teachers (supervision, intervision, etc.)

Some of these advantages may yet appear as burdens:

- Familiarity with the staff can be blocking some issues and open discussions.
- Teachers may feel more comfortable if they are far from the school and relaxed from everyday duties.
- Teachers may consider school-based activities as “obligatory”, being forced to take part.

Anyhow, for the reflection and cooperation to become regular part of the profession of a teacher, it is inevitable to support the schools' efforts to collegially develop teacher professionalism.

A concrete experience; school psychologist working with teachers

Both writers of this text are experienced lecturers, having participated in integral school-development projects and specialized courses of in-service teacher and Headteacher training. One of them works as school psychologist in a basic school and had decided to combine her two roles to boost the professional development of the teachers she works with. Her activities got a certain systematic form at the beginning of the 1999/2000 school year and lasted for the whole period of ten months. It must be said that these efforts were mainly supported by the managers of the school, rather than by the teachers, and the school had had no experience with such actions. It was a standard school in a city centre, employing thirty five teachers in 1999/2000, attended by 565 pupils.

Goals of the school-based professional development of teachers

- to support the teacher's reflection of his or her own performance
- to initiate more profound and systematic debates on specific working issues
- to stimulate changes of fossilized patterns of communication and cooperation among teachers
- to find more efficient ways of understanding and solving problems

Working methods

- discussion groups focusing on particular cases
 - “systematic approach“ to the discussion (based on new knowledge being built on one's own or other person's experience, alternative consideration and sensitivity to a change)
- The course of the session: the lecturer leads the discussion, asking constructive questions and employing the presence of the “reflective team” of participating teachers. All teachers have been introduced to the rules of team communication.

Timing

- duration of one discussion group session sixty minutes
- frequency of sessions once every three weeks, according to the needs of the teachers

Target group

- five to six volunteer teachers of the school
- the team could have been changed between sessions, which was the case

The teachers nor the psychologist had had any previous experience with this particular type of work. From the very beginning of the experiment, the psychologist was trying to stimulate the documentation of what had been said and to identify the chances, the drawbacks and the risks of this type of work.

The other co-author of this text was therefore asked to supervise the process and support the running and final evaluations of the experiment. His job was focused on:

- the identification of the teachers' needs and expectations, as seen from the viewpoint of their school-based professional development
- the identification of the pros and contras of school-based professional development
- the recommendation of alternative procedures

The supervisor studied the school's documentation and the documentation on the group work (issues, number of participants, number of groups, etc.) and led group interviews with five teachers at the end of the school year. Also, he edited, administrated, and evaluated the questionnaire for the reflective team (twelve teachers), and was leading supervisory interviews with the school psychologist during the whole school year.

The role of the supervisor in the scheme and especially the efficiency of a psychologist — supervisor relationship still have not been evaluated and are disregarded in this text.

Some partial results

In the course of almost a year seven discussion groups were made up, attended by twelve teachers. It was evident that only some of the teachers were interested, and these people showed their interest repeatedly.

Most issues under discussion tended to focus on individual pupils, dealing mainly with their discipline and motivation.

Teachers' evaluation of the experiment

Teachers see a reflective group as a platform of introduction to opinions and views of other people. They expect the opportunity to contemplate certain working issues “differently”. They are being assured of not “walking alone” with their

difficulties and efforts. They suppose the discussions will help them talk in a more adequate manner about various working issues with their colleagues.

Yet, it is not rare for them to say that alternative views and recommendations would not help them solve their specific problems. A shared scepticism can be felt: “We must anyway go on our own; there can't be any universal advice.” Remarks of more than a few teachers pointed out the inability of some colleagues to risk being open about certain questions. Another painful problem was the lack of time and willingness to return repeatedly to previous issues in order to identify the change and discuss the new experience.

Some results as seen from the viewpoint of the school psychologist

The core of the group is made up of “constant” supporters who bring forward new ideas, are usually very active, and develop efforts to help the others. Nonetheless, these teachers are precisely those who are labelled by their managers as good, well-liked, and of no problems.

Others often belong to a group of “voluntarily withdrawn” teachers. Insufficient “readiness” to sincerity usually activates some self-defending tendencies when it becomes clear that a pupil has no problem about his or her inappropriate behaviour but the teacher has one about how to manage such a behaviour. For many teachers it is unacceptable to “have a problem”. A defensive participant in the group then tends to playing the game of “yes, but...” (I've tried everything but nothing works...)

Teachers rarely have enough time (or endeavour, courage) to get back to previous cases and work regularly on reflections. The discussion groups vary, therefore teachers are often lacking in feedback about the change. Intervisory meetings of teachers from different discussion groups are rather formal and inspired by spontaneous activities of a few individuals.

Also, it has been confirmed what we had expected: many members of the staff would not show any interest in working with the psychologist. The participation of some of them seemed very formal, complying with the general rule: “It is obligatory to work now and then on one's professional development.”

Some recommendations for future actions

We are aware that, for the time being, our experience is limited and momentary, so that no significant conclusions can be made. Our aspirations were meant to rather identify some essential factors that restrain or strengthen such efforts. In spite of that, we consider useful to present our experience and try to define some recommendations:

- It is evident that noteworthy and “formative” effects can only be achieved through systematic and long-term work with a team of teachers. The ways of communication, one's thinking about pupils and teaching, and the approach to faults — all this is changing very slowly. The episodic participation in discussion groups can hardly be stimulating into substantial changes.

- To work on a more regular basis, closer cooperation with the school management would be of much importance. A tolerant and acceptant approach is not always

sufficient. The management's involvement in running evaluation of the activity and its incorporation into a wider project of the school could bring up more success.

- Regularity and systematization of actions could be supported by careful documentation of every session. The efforts would be more purposeful and transparent for all those involved, and even for outsiders, if there was the opportunity to return to previously discussed cases, to work with feedback, and to identify the change.

- At the beginning it is inevitable to count with feelings of danger and uncertainty. It seems more secure to start discussing general issues (fidgety children, non-motivated children, etc.) and only later shift to individual cases and individual teacher's performance.

- To be able to involve most teachers of the school, it is necessary to be offering the discussion groups repeatedly, to present the team's results, and to seek for new issues to be discussed. At the same time, it is necessary to delimit clearly the rules of voluntariness, undirective communication, discretion, etc.

- It remains doubtful whether a school psychologist — as someone closely linked to the school — is the right person to lead these activities. To a certain extent, the character of the psychologist is important, but an external, independent lecturer could well be perceived by teachers as a “safer” partner.

Conclusion

A steadfast and systematic support to reflective practice has been started only recently and our first results show a certain potential of this work to uphold the professional (personalized) development of teachers. At the same time, many circumstances indicate that the milieu of Czech schools makes such efforts relatively difficult. It seems that the activities of an outsider who enters the school (and is supported from outside) can hardly be successful. The reflective team and the changes to be carried out need a clarified and permanent support from those who represent various levels of school leadership. We are talking about a phenomenon which would emerge from a complex process of school culture change — not as mere structural novelty, meant to bring relief to a few individuals in an otherwise fossilized school.

Without a permanent and realistic opportunity of some regular critical reflection (both individual and collective), any activities make little sense and are doomed to failure. Failure in our context means poor communication and cooperation, too much routine, stereotypes, or even cynism. For such innovative efforts to be efficient, it is necessary to stimulate teachers and schools from outside, i. e. on the level of school policy, which in the Czech milieu is still not the case.

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